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President Reagan

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Following is President Reagan's address to the nation, Washington, D.C., March 16, 1986.

My fellow Americans, I must speak to you tonight about a mounting danger in Central America that threatens the security of the United States. This danger will not go away; it will grow worse, much worse, if we fail to take action now. I am speaking of Nicaragua, a Soviet ally on the American mainland only 2 hours flying time from our own borders. With over a billion dollars in Soviet-bloc aid, the communist Government of Nicaragua has launched a campaign to subvert and topple its democratic neighbors.

Using Nicaragua as a base, the Soviets and Cubans can become the dominant power in the crucial corridor between North and South America. Established there, they will be in a position to threaten the Panama Canal, interdict our vital Caribbean sealanes, and, ultimately, move against Mexico. Should that happen, desperate Latin peoples by the millions would begin fleeing north into the cities of the southern United States or to wherever some hope of freedom remained.

The U.S. Congress has before it a proposal to help stop this threat. The legislation is an aid package of $100 million for the more than 20,000 freedom fighters struggling to bring democracy to their country and eliminate this communist menace at its source. But this $100 million is not an additional $100 million. We are not asking for a single dime in new money. We are asking only to be permitted to switch a small part of our present defense budget—to the defense of our own southern frontier.

Gathered in Nicaragua already are thousands of Cuban military advisers, contingents of Soviets and East Germans, and all the elements of international terror—from the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization] to Italy's Red Brigades. Why are they there? Because, as Colonel Qadhafi has publicly exulted: "Nicaragua means a great thing, it means fighting America near its borders—fighting America at its doorstep."

For our own security, the United States must deny the Soviet Union a beachhead in North America. But let me make one thing plain. I am not talking about American troops. They are not needed; they have not been requested. The democratic resistance fighting in Nicaragua is only asking America for the supplies and support to save their own country from communism.

The question the Congress of the United States will now answer is a simple one: will we give the Nicaraguan democratic resistance the means to recapture their betrayed revolution, or will we turn our backs and ignore the malignancy in Managua until it spreads and becomes a mortal threat to the entire New World? Will we permit the Soviet Union to put a second Cuba, a second Libya, right on the doorstep of the United States?

The Nicaraguan Threat

How can such a small country pose such a great threat? Well, it is not Nicaragua alone that threatens us, but those using Nicaragua as a privileged sanctuary for their struggle against the United States.

Their first target is Nicaragua's neighbors. With an army and militia of 120,000 men, backed by more than 3,000 Cuban military advisers, Nicaragua's Armed Forces are the largest Central America has ever seen. The Nicaraguan military machine is more powerful than all its neighbors combined.

This map [see p. 2] represents much of the Western Hemisphere. Now let me show you the countries in Central America where weapons supplied by Nicaraguan communists have been found: Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala. Radicals from Panama to the south have been trained in Nicaragua. But the Sandinista revolutionary reach extends well beyond their immediate neighbors. In South America and the Caribbean, the Nicaraguan communists have provided support in the form of military training, safe haven, communications, false documents, safe transit, and sometimes weapons to radicals from the following countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic. Even that is not all, for there was an old communist slogan that the Sandinistas have made clear they honor: the road to victory goes through Mexico.

If maps, statistics, and facts aren't persuasive enough, we have the words of the Sandinistas and Soviets them-

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Mexico
The Bahamas
Cuba
Dominican Republic
Haiti
Jamaica
Puerto Rico (U.S.)
St. Christopher and Nevis
Antigua and Barbuda
Guadeloupe (Fr.)
Dominica
Martinique (Fr.)
St. Lucia
St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Barbados
Grenada
Trinidad and Tobago
Belize
Honduras
Guatemala
El Salvador
Nicaragua
Costa Rica
Panama
Central America
Venezuela
Guyana
Suriname
French Guiana (Fr.)
South America
Colombia
Ecuador
Peru
Brazil
Bolivia
Paraguay
Uruguay
Chile
Argentina

selves. One of the highest level Sandinista leaders was asked by an American magazine whether their communist revolution will—and I quote—"be exported to El Salvador, then Guatemala, then Honduras, and then Mexico?" He responded, "That is one historical prophecy of Ronald Reagan that is absolutely true."

Well, the Soviets have been no less candid. A few years ago, then Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko noted that Central America was "boiling like a cauldron" and ripe for revolution. In a Moscow meeting in 1983, Soviet Chief of Staff Marshal Ogarkov declared: "Over two decades there was only Cuba in Latin America. Today there are Nicaragua, Grenada, and a serious battle is going on in El Salvador."

But we don't need their quotes; the American forces who liberated Grenada captured thousands of documents that demonstrated Soviet intent to bring communist revolution home to the Western Hemisphere.

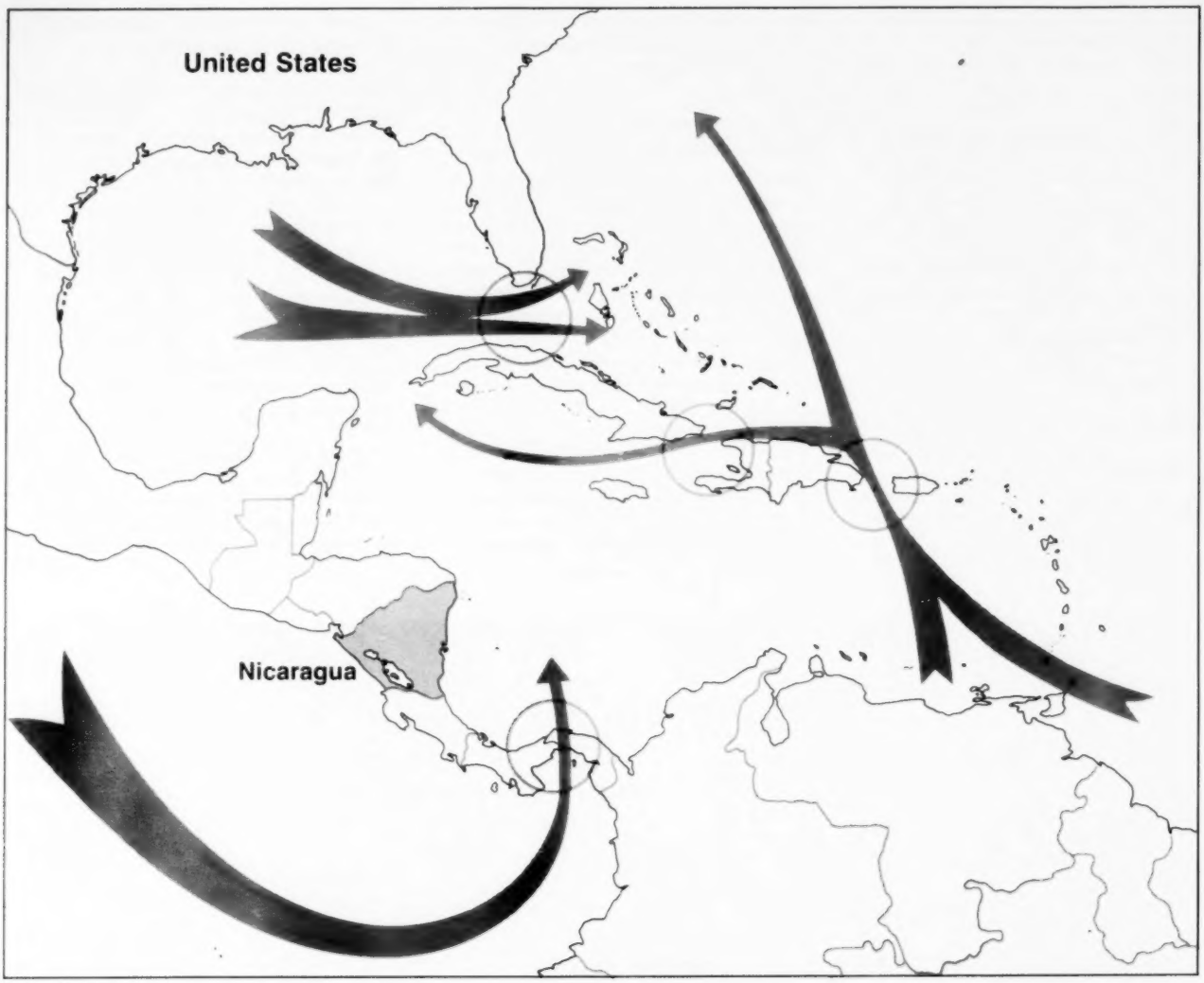
The Nature of the Sandinista Regime

So, we're clear on the intentions of the Sandinistas and those who back them. Let us be equally clear about the nature of their regime. To begin with, the Sandinistas have revoked the civil liberties of the Nicaraguan people, depriving them of any legal right to speak, to publish, to assemble, or to worship freely. Independent newspapers have been shut down. There is no longer any independent labor movement in Nicaragua or any right to strike. As AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations] leader Lane Kirkland has said, "Nicaragua's headlong rush into the totalitarian camp cannot be denied—by anyone who has eyes to see."

Well, like communist governments everywhere, the Sandinistas have launched assaults against ethnic and religious groups. The capital's only synagogue was desecrated and firebombed—the entire Jewish community forced to flee Nicaragua. Protestant Bible meetings have been broken up by raids, by mob violence, by machineguns. The Catholic Church has been singled out—priests have been expelled from the country, Catholics beaten in the streets after attending Mass. The Catholic primate of Nicaragua, Cardinal Obando y Bravo, has put the matter forthrightly. "We want to state clearly," he says, "that this government is totalitarian. We are dealing with an enemy of the Church."

Evangelical pastor Prudencio Baltodano found out he was on a Sandinista hit list when an army patrol asked his name. "You don't know what we do to the evangelical pastors. We

Frederico Vaughn, top aide to one of Nicaragua's nine ruling commandantes, assists in loading illegal narcotics bound for the United States.



don't believe in God," they told him. Pastor Baltodano was tied to a tree, struck in the forehead with a rifle butt, stabbed in the neck with a bayonet—finally, his ears were cut off, and he was left for dead. "See if your God will save you," they mocked. Well, God did have other plans for Pastor Baltodano. He lived to tell the world his story—to tell it, among other places, right here in the White House.

I could go on about this nightmare—the blacklists, the secret prisons, the Sandinista-directed mob violence. But, as if all this brutality at home were not enough, the Sandinistas are transforming their nation into a safe house, a command post for international terror.

The Sandinistas not only sponsor terror in El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras—terror that led last summer to the murder of four U.S. marines in a cafe in San Salvador—they provide a sanctuary for terror. Italy has charged Nicaragua with harboring their worst terrorists, the Red Brigades.

The Sandinistas have even involved themselves in the international drug trade. I know every American parent concerned about the drug problem will be outraged to learn that top Nicaraguan Government officials are deeply involved in drug trafficking. This picture [see p. 3], secretly taken at a military airfield outside Managua, shows Frederico Vaughn, a top aide to one of the nine commandantes who rule Nicaragua, loading an aircraft with illegal narcotics bound for the United States. No, there seems to be no crime to which the Sandinistas will not stoop—this is an outlaw regime.

U.S. Security Interests and the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance

If we return for a moment to our map [see above], it becomes clear why having this regime in Central America imperils our vital security interests.

Through this crucial part of the Western Hemisphere passes almost half our foreign trade, more than half our imports of crude oil, and a significant portion of the military supplies we would have to send to the NATO alliance in the event of a crisis. These are the chokepoints where the sealanes could be closed.

Central America is strategic to our Western alliance, a fact always understood by foreign enemies. In World War II, only a few German U-boats, operating from bases 4,000 miles away in Germany and occupied Europe, inflicted crippling losses on U.S. shipping right off our southern coast.

Today, Warsaw Pact engineers are building a deep water port on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, similar to the naval base in Cuba for Soviet-built submarines. They are also constructing, outside Managua, the largest military airfield in Central America—similar to those in Cuba, from which Russian Bear bombers patrol the U.S. east coast from Maine to Florida.

How did this menace to the peace and security of our Latin neighbors and, ultimately, ourselves suddenly emerge? Let me give you a brief history.

In 1979, the people of Nicaragua rose up and overthrew a corrupt dictatorship. At first, the revolutionary leaders promised free elections and respect for human rights. But among them was an organization called the Sandinistas. Theirs was a communist organization, and their support of the revolutionary goals was sheer deceit. Quickly and ruthlessly, they took complete control.

Two months after the revolution, the Sandinista leadership met in secret and, in what came to be known as the "72-Hour Document," described themselves as the "vanguard" of a revolution that would sweep Central America, Latin America, and, finally, the world. Their true enemy, they declared: the United States.

Rather than make this document public, they followed the advice of Fidel Castro, who told them to put on a facade of democracy. While Castro viewed the democratic elements in Nicaragua with contempt, he urged his Nicaraguan friends to keep some of them in their coalition, in minor posts, as window dressing to deceive the West. And that way, Castro said, you can have your revolution, and the Americans will pay for it.

And we did pay for it. More aid flowed to Nicaragua from the United States in the first 18 months under the Sandinistas than from any other country. Only when the mask fell, and the face of totalitarianism became visible to the world, did the aid stop.

Confronted with this emerging threat, early in our Administration I went to Congress and, with bipartisan support, managed to get help for the nations surrounding Nicaragua. Some of you may remember the inspiring scene when the people of El Salvador braved the threats and gunfire of the communist guerrillas—guerrillas directed and supplied from Nicaragua—and went to the polls to vote decisively for democracy. For the communists in El Salvador it was a humiliating defeat.

But there was another factor the communists never counted on, a factor that now promises to give freedom a second chance—the freedom fighters of Nicaragua.

You see, when the Sandinistas betrayed the revolution, many who had fought the old Somoza dictatorship literally took to the hills and, like the French Resistance that fought the Nazis, began fighting the Soviet-bloc communists and their Nicaraguan collaborators. These few have now been joined by thousands.

With their blood and courage, the freedom fighters of Nicaragua have pinned down the Sandinista army and bought the people of Central America precious time. We Americans owe them a debt of gratitude. In helping to thwart the Sandinistas and their Soviet mentors, the resistance has contributed directly to the security of the United States.

Since its inception in 1982, the democratic resistance has grown dramatically in strength. Today, it numbers more than 20,000 volunteers, and more come every day. But now the freedom fighters' supplies are running short, and they are virtually defenseless against the helicopter gunships Moscow has sent to Managua.

A Crucial Test

Now comes the crucial test for the Congress of the United States. Will they provide the assistance the freedom fighters need to deal with Russian tanks and gunships, or will they abandon the democratic resistance to its communist enemy?

In answering that question, I hope Congress will reflect deeply upon what it is the resistance is fighting against in Nicaragua. Ask yourselves, what in the world are Soviets, East Germans, Bulgarians, North Koreans, Cubans, and terrorists from the PLO and the Red Brigades doing in our hemisphere, camped on our own doorstep? Is that for peace?

Why have the Soviets invested $600 million to build Nicaragua into an armed force almost the size of Mexico's—a country 15 times as large and 25 times as populous. Is that for peace?

Why did Nicaragua's dictator, Daniel Ortega, go to the Communist Party Congress in Havana and endorse Castro's call for the worldwide triumph of communism? Was that for peace?

Some Members of Congress ask me, why not negotiate? That's a good question, and let me answer it directly. We have sought, and still seek, a negotiated peace and a democratic future in a free Nicaragua. Ten times we have met and tried to reason with the Sandinistas. Ten times we were rebuffed. Last year, we endorsed church-mediated negotiations between the regime and the resistance. The Soviets and the Sandinistas responded with a rapid arms buildup of mortars, tanks, artillery, and helicopter gunships.

Clearly, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact have grasped the great stakes involved, the strategic importance of Nicaragua. The Soviets have made their decision—to support the communists. Fidel Castro has made his decision—to support the communists. Arafat, Qadhafi, and the Ayatollah Khomeini have made their decision—to support the communists. Now, we must make our decision. With Congress' help, we can prevent an outcome deeply injurious to the national security of the United States. If we fail, there will be no evading responsibility—history will hold us accountable. This is not some narrow partisan issue; it's a national security issue, an issue on which we must act not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans.

Forty years ago, Republicans and Democrats joined together behind the Truman Doctrine. It must be our policy, Harry Truman declared, to support peoples struggling to preserve their freedom. Under that doctrine, Congress sent aid to Greece just in time to save that country from the closing grip of a communist tyranny. We saved freedom in Greece then—and with that same bipartisan spirit, we can save freedom in Nicaragua today.

Over the coming days, I will continue the dialogue with Members of Congress, talking to them, listening to them, hearing out their concerns. Senator Scoop Jackson, who led the fight on Capitol Hill for an awareness of the danger in Central America, said it best: on matters of national security, the best politics is no politics.

You know, recently one of our most distinguished Americans, Clare Boothe Luce, had this to say about the coming vote. "In considering this crisis," Mrs. Luce said, "my mind goes back to a similar moment in our history—back to the first years after Cuba had fallen to Fidel. One day during those years, I had lunch at the White House with a man I had known since he was a boy—John F. Kennedy. 'Mr. President,' I said, 'no matter how exalted or great a man may be, history will have time to give him no more than one sentence. George Washington—he founded our

country. Abraham Lincoln—he freed the slaves and preserved the Union. Winston Churchill—he saved Europe.' 'And what, Clare,' John Kennedy said, 'did you believe—or do you believe my sentence will be?' 'Mr. President,' she answered, 'your sentence will be that you stopped the communists—or that you did not.' "

Well, tragically, John Kennedy never had the chance to decide which that would be. Now, leaders of our own time must do so. My fellow Americans, you know where I stand. The Soviets and Sandinistas must not be permitted to crush freedom in Central America and threaten our own security on our own doorstep.

Now the Congress must decide where it stands. Mrs. Luce ended by saying: "Only this is certain. Through all time to come, this, the 99th Congress of the United States, will be remembered as that body of men and women that either stopped the communists before it was too late—or did not."

So tonight I ask you to do what you've done so often in the past. Get in touch with your Representative and Senators and urge them to vote yes; tell them to help the freedom fighters—help us prevent a communist takeover of Central America.

I have only 3 years left to serve my country, 3 years to carry out the responsibilities you entrusted to me, 3 years to work for peace. Could there be any greater tragedy than for us to sit back and permit this cancer to spread, leaving my successor to face far more agonizing decisions in the years ahead? The freedom fighters seek a political solution. They are willing to lay down their arms and negotiate to restore the original goals of the revolution, a democracy in which the people of Nicaragua choose their own government. That is our goal also, but it can only come about if the democratic resistance is able to bring pressure to bear on those who have seized power.

We still have time to do what must be done so history will say of us, we had the vision, the courage, and good sense to come together and act—Republicans and Democrats—when the price was not high and the risks were not great. We left America safe, we left America secure, we left America free—still a beacon of hope to mankind, still a light unto the nations. ■

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